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Winter with the Writers
The Colossus of Home
By Allison Hughes

Abstract

Although authors Esmeralda Santiago and Colson Whitehead come from divergent backgrounds and writing styles, one theme remains congruent. In their respective novels, *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Santiago, and *The Colossus of New York* by Whitehead both revolve around a theme of what it means to be at home—with one's society and with one's self. Not only does a sense of home formulate man's inner conflicts and triumphs, but it also provides a sense of imperfect comfort and nostalgia. The overall message of their stories is achieved through character usage, imagery and tone; however, each author utilizes these literary techniques to a different advantage. Both authors find unique paths to arrive at the same message; although one may relocate and assimilate with new worlds, any effort to abandon the resounding melody of one's home would be fruitless. This work examines the comparisons and differences between both authors' views on home, and the literary methods through which these views are achieved. Through examination of the two key works, it can be determined that despite their divergent backgrounds, characters of both authors find a sense of peace, acceptance, and sorrow through their views of home. These emotions develop not only their sense of self, but also their direction throughout their lives.

Although authors Esmeralda Santiago and Colson Whitehead come from divergent backgrounds and writing styles, one theme remains congruent. In their respective novels, When I Was Puerto Rican by Santiago, and The Colossus of New York by Whitehead both revolve around a theme of what it means to be at home—with one's society and with one's self. Not only does a sense of home formulate man's inner conflicts and triumphs, but it also provides a sense of imperfect comfort and nostalgia. The overall message of their stories is achieved through character usage, imagery and tone; however, each author utilizes these literary techniques to a different advantage. Both authors find unique paths to arrive at the same message; although one may relocate and assimilate with new worlds, any effort to abandon the resounding melody of one's home would be fruitless. They will forever be left "con la música por dentro"—with the music inside (173).

Esmeralda Santiago achieves this message partly through the use of her characters, which symbolize the lessons of life. One of the most prominent supporting characters in her memoir is her mother, whom she calls "Mami." The image of Mami is of a woman both gentle and strong, both willing to comfort and willing to scold. Some of the imagery surrounding Mami is tender, as that of a walk Esmeralda shares with her as a young girl. "She curled a loose strand of hair behind my ribboned braids and hugged me. She was soft, warm"(144). This side of Mami becomes a representation of the reassuring aspects of home and of the Puerto Rico she knew as a child. She is a symbol of comfort and solace.

This same sense of soothing can also become brash and violent, however, as Mami frequently scolds Esmeralda and beats her as punishment for any missteps. After Esmeralda

kicks a local boy between the legs when he exposes himself to her, Mami reprimands the young girl by hitting her with a frying pan in front of her siblings. “I let my body go limp to take her abuse,” she writes, “and part of me left my body and stood beside my brothers and sisters, their eyes round, tear filled, frightened, their skinny bodies jerking with every hit I took”(119). This type of reprimand was frequent, as Esmeralda often took cocotazos from her mother, or “hits on the head with knuckles”(272). Now, the same personification of comfort has become the image of sternness and severity. What once taught through love also teaches through fear.

The same is true for Colson Whitehead’s image of New York City, his one main character in The Colossus of New York. At the center of the “big hungry city” lies Central Park. Like Mami, Central Park represents how the image of home can mean both relief and risk. On one hand, the citizens of New York City are able to lie on their backs in the park, comforted by the “rich blue” of the sky that is “like a friend” in its familiarity. On the other, Central Park also stands as “an empire of broken teeth, scraped knees and tiny bits of glass”(41). It is both a place to seek refuge from the cold of winter once spring has arrived, and a place that is partially unsafe, congested with litter, the dispossessed and the dangerous. While gazing up as “the sunlight catches on glass surfaces,” he illustrates, one must “watch out for horses and wake manure”(39). Like the image of Mami, Central Park is a representation of the way home can be both a comfort and a nuisance due to its imperfections. Central Park has a way of both hugging the citizens of New York and offering up cocotazos, a relative beating used to keep its fellow New Yorkers in touch with both the pleasant and the ugly sides of reality. Whitehead uses the metaphor of a “trusty sweater” to further illustrate this point. “It will keep you warm,” he writes. “Maybe no one will notice it’s full of holes”(26).

Another theme regarding home that is illustrated in both authors' works is the concept of a loss of restraint. A sense of home cannot be manipulated or contained, and chaos and panic can ensue. The symbol of this loss of control in When I Was Puerto Rican is Tata, Esmeralda's grandmother. In her memoir, Esmeralda describes Tata as being a drunk, who sometimes lashes out at the situations that have moved beyond her sphere of influence. She is a woman who seeks control over her daughter and over her environment, and when this cannot be achieved, she becomes frenzied and livid. Esmeralda explains that "when [Tata] drank, she was nasty," and details an incident of alcohol-induced rage when Tata lunges at her daughter's boyfriend, Francisco. "Tata flew out of the kitchen like a witch towards the full moon, and screamed insults at Francisco," she writes. "Mami always came back from his house happy. That put Tata in a dark mood, especially when she'd been drinking"(237). Mami's relationship with a much younger Francisco is outside of Tata's influence, and she feels that such a bond is disgraceful and an embarrassment. She refuses to accept that the traditions of her home have shifted with time, and that the life of her daughter is independent from her own. Unable to accept that her daughter's path is on a trajectory she cannot control, Tata explodes and grades the situation as negative and alarming.

The citizens of New York also see a loss of control over one's setting as dreadful and ominous, leading to a sense of panic and forthcoming danger. Colson uses the New York subway system as a prime example of the fear associated with being in the passenger seat of one's environment. Like Tata's outburst, the subway ride Colson depicts is full of a sense of unpredictability and torment. He illustrates the story of one passenger who finds himself riding a train he never meant to get on, with the boroughs of New York above changing with the charging

train, leading the passenger into uncharted territory. “Burrowing under a river, good God the horror of a whole different borough. It could be apocalypse above for all you know and who wouldn’t think disaster, stuck in the tunnel like that”(56). Like Tata, Colson’s subway rider is forced onto a compartment that is changing and moving without his control, resulting in panic as his environment shifts into the unfamiliar. The result is to “abandon all hope”(57). Hope and control are inextricably linked for both environments, and without both, one is left to fight back like a caged animal—whether that means lunging at a daughter’s boyfriend or panicking to grasp one’s wallet from a pickpocket. In both stories, the characters are seeking a means to deal with the unsolicited mutability of their environments.

Thirdly, both stories contend that home will always have an influence even when its permanence is shaky. Both authors use their direct environments of New York and Puerto Rico and their characters to illustrate this point concerning home’s influence on identity. In When I Was A Puerto Rican, outside of the environment itself, Papi becomes a character that depicts the invisible influence of home. Although he is frequently in and out of Esmeralda’s life, his presence is always felt and he becomes an integral part of the story even when she is not directly with him. Early on in her tale, she notices, “Papi left one day and didn’t return that night. For the next three days he didn’t appear. We knew better than to ask where Papi was or when he might be coming back. There was no way for her to know”(32). Yet even after feeling abandoned, Esmeralda is insistent on remaining in contact with him, sending letters and seeking his approval. Throughout part of her life she views him as a fallen hero—a man who saves her from the clutches of Señora Leona, the teacher who spit at her. He is a man who believes she can carry the weight of heavy cinderblocks to build their home, when everyone else expects her to be weak.

Papi is his own symbol of home in this sense, because even when unintended, he becomes a source from which Esmeralda seeks strength. Whenever she is feeling weak or afraid, she makes an effort to return to him, seeking a sense of home and comfort. Although he is laced with perhaps the most imperfections of any other character, he resembles the sense of home the closest. While his physical form is not always with Esmeralda, the emotions she connects with her father are always present in her life because she is aware that he is always a part of her.

The same is true for Colson's sense of home in The Colossus of New York. Even when the city has seemingly turned its back on its residents, a shared sense of identity remains. The relationship between New York City and its residents is as dynamic and evolving as Esmeralda's relationship with her father. Colson uses the image of Times Square to illustrate this evolution of home. "They say, I do not recognize this place. They agree and lament, try to find the words to give to anyone who will listen: It's not the way it used to be. Of course it's not. It's not even what it was five minutes ago"(143). Like Esmeralda waiting for Papi's return, the inhabitants of New York City wait for things to go back to the way they remember them, with a patience that never pays off. Despite the ongoing changes, the repetitive rejection from the city, the citizens of New York search for a sense of home there that is "brighter and binding"(146). Just as Esmeralda, they seek stability, and find hope in a sense of home because "some things cannot be demolished. Some things reach down and become bedrock"(153).

Even when leaving the physical sense of home, the bedrock of Puerto Rico or New York City, home never really leaves the characters of Santiago and Whitehead's pieces. While the exit "door opens easily, and they are not the first through," the lasting memories of home remain with them and formulate the people they become. "No matter their hometowns," Colson accounts, "no

matter their reasons for sliding cash through ticket windows, on the bus they are all alike”(16). All of Whitehead and Santiago’s characters are simply searching for a level of acceptance, a level of home, which will resonate even when they “settle in for the journey and forget”(158). For both Santiago and Whitehead, this message is achieved through the lives of the characters, their relationships, and the soul of one personified city. It is through the usage of their literary techniques that both authors are able to create this vision of home, which resonates with every reader regardless of ethnicity, background, and individual struggles. The theme of belonging is universal, and both authors bring to life a sense of hunger, fear, and gratitude for the place each of them calls home.

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